MAHAD SATYAGRAHA: THE DECLARATION OF EQUALITY

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Introduction

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born into an untouchable 'Mahar' family at Mhow, in present Madhya Pradesh, on 14 April 1891.

His paternal grandfather Maloji Sakpal came from a good family and his father Ramji Sakpal was a head master in the Military

School in the rank of subedar-major in the 2nd Grenadiers. His mother Bhimabai belonged to a rich family of Murbadkars from Murbad Village in Thana District of Bombay, whose father and six uncles were all Subhedar Majors in the Army.[1]

By normal standards Ambedkar would have had a regular life, however, the reality of him being born into an untouchable family changed this whole course of a possible normal and comfortable life. Ambedkar did his primary school at Dapoli but at the age of five the family moved to Satara and hence his brother and he attended high school at Satara. It was during his high school days he tasted the painful stigma of untouchability. It so happened that one day in summer, Ambedkar, his elder brother and their nephew set out to meet their father at Goregoan where he now worked as a cashier after his retirement as Headmaster. They got the train from Padali and travelled till Masur expecting their father to be waiting for them at the station. Theletter did not reach their father on time and after waiting for hours in vain, they somehow persuaded the station master, a caste Hindu, to arrange a bullock cart to take them to Goregoan. Hardly a yard had the cart pulled, and the 'god-fearing caste Hindu cartman' came to learn that these welldressed boys in his cart were the 'accursed Untouchables' and his fury knew no bounds. In a fit of rage, the cartman threw them out on the road like waste because 'he felt that they had polluted his wooden cart and destroyed the purity of his domestic animals'. More dramas followed; the boys pacified the cartman's rage by paying double the fare, Ambedkar's brother drove the cart, and the cartman followed the cart on foot. The journey turned out to be more than what the boys were prepared for, from evening till midnight, they travelled parched with thirst as no one was willing to give them water to drink – people shooed them away or pointed them to filthy waters. This was the day, Ambedkar was introduced to a rude awakening that 'he belonged to a family that was untouchable, degraded to drink and eat filthy things' only to confirm it a few days later when out of

[1] Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1954, pp. 8-9.

thirst he drank water stealthily at a public water tap and when it was found out, he was beaten mercilessly.[2]

Experiences of trouble caved in early and as a young boy at school, like any other untouchable student, he was not only made to sit away from the upper-caste boys but also had to bear the brunt of his Sanskrit teacher who refused to teach him at all.[3]

In Hindu tradition, ideas of segregation of one caste from another, and arranging them in a hierarchy, played a central role in ordering the basic structure of the society.Such rigid caste system binds a person till her/his death because once a person is born in to that particular caste, her/his status is determined and absolute - 'The birth decides one's status and this cannot be altered irrespective of any talent that aperson may develop or wealth a person may collect.'[4]Caste system emerged from the Varna social order that include the *Varnasharma dharma* along with the four-fold varna division in the society which is enshrined in the Hindu sacred texts. In this case, the untouchables, who are called the Dalits in modern times, find themselves in a complex situation because the arguments of them being included in the varna system is not clear. Vivek Kumar has made a powerful argument by bringing in the arguments of MN Srinivas who writes that the untouchable castes find no mention in the hymn. Likewise, Louis Dumont mentions that 'There is in actual fact a fifth category, the untouchables, who are left outside the classification.'[5] And in this order, in the life of a Hindu, a person is infused with ideas of purity/impurity from the moment of birth to the moment of death, and every day from the moment s/he wake up. And in this set-up, 'certain castes were considered impure, polluting and untouchable, and occupied the lowest rungs of the hierarchy….'[6]For centuries, Hindu society has been plagued with the ideas of purity and pollution depending on the category of caste one belonged. This is to emphasise the condition on which Ambedkarrose to educate himself and others like him who belonged to the same lowest rung of the social ladder, and carved a niche for themselves as equal human beings.

Ambedkar is undoubtedly one of the exemplary figures in history who reasoned and fought for human equality his entire life. The life of equality he envisaged was of mutual relationship between 'thinking equality and living equality'. In this context, a very potent argument put up by Soumyabrata Choudhary cannot go unmentioned. Choudhary asserts that, Ambedkar who was born in a customary system where customary Hindu law accepted untouchability and, 'born in an untouchable caste had the courage to try out living a life of equality with the other castes and at the same time force a thought of equality in a life which was fundamentally unequal.'[7] Ambedkar's approach of thinking about equality and living

[2] *Ibid*., pp. 10-3.
[3] Ramadas V, *Dr. B.R Ambedkar as an Educational and Social Reformer*, Thesis. Department of Adult Education and Extension Services, University of Calicut, 2002, p. 18.
[4] Deepesh Nandan, B.R. Ambedkar's Ideas on Egalitarian Society and Hindu Social System: The Circulation of Social Justice in 21st Century, in Dr. Desh Raj Sirswal (ed), *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: The Maker of Modern India*, Centre for Positive Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies (CPPIS), Pehowa, Kurukshetra, 2016, p. 22.
[5] Vivek Kumar, Situating Dalits in Indian Sociology, *Sociological Bulletin*, September-December 2005, Vol. 54, No. 3, Special Issue on South Asia: The State of Sociology: Issues of Relevance and Rigour (September-December 2005), pp. 514-532, p 518.
[6] A.M. Shah, Purity, Impurity, Untouchability: Then and Now, *Sociological Bulletin*, September-December 2007, Vol. 56, No. 3 (September-December 2007), pp. 355-368, pp. 355-56.
[7] Soumyabrata Choudhary, *Living Science* – 13 March 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wow9gurMjSw (accessed on 27 July 2020).

an equal life consisted of the most opposite composition – his location as an untouchable and his quest for equality in a society that was inherently unequal.

Ambedkar, both because of his scholarship and training, clearly saw the lack of knowledge, ignorance, superstitions and meek acceptance of all the deprivations and dis-privileges imposed on the untouchables. This was the reason he started publishing *Mooknayak* and *Bahiskrut* (*Bahiskrit*) *Bharat* later on, which were published in Marathi and were the first to reach the common man. These writings highlighted the plights of the untouchables which the Brahmins, clearly, had no interest whatsoever. In these writings he gave considerable importance to Satyagraha and its philosophy, as well as the course of action to be followed so as to draw attention of the caste Hindus in particular and others too in respect of the denial of public utility such as access to public resources like water to untouchables. The Mahad Satyagraha naturally occupies a very important place in these writings.[8]

Events leading to the march of Mahad Satyagraha

Ambedkar believed 'democracy lies not in the form of government but in terms of association between the people who form that society.'[9] He was resolutely firm in his belief that the discriminatory treatment based on caste and tradition was a violation of a basic human rights principle and vouched for a certain substantial equality to be enjoyed by all groups in a society both materially as well as the right to live with dignity and self-respect. And for such reasons of discrimination, exclusion and deprivation of basic human rights, the Mahad Satyagraha was undertaken.

Before dwelling on Mahad Satyagraha, it will help to understand the core meaning of 'Satyagraha'. Satyagraha is a word coined to describe the technique Gandhi first used in South Africa and continued to develop in India and became to be understood to mean the Gandhian method of conducting conflict without violence.[10] In Gandhi's own words, 'It is a kind of struggle in which there can be no defeat and no cause for regret. A man can only become stronger through the struggle. He suffers no exhaustion and at every stage he gains fresh strength.[11] Gandhiji was convinced of the power of non-violentresistance to evil, if properly led, was invincible. This shared conviction of non-violent peaceful resistance to evil led Ambedkar to launch the path breaking march to Mahad as a declaration of human equality and dignity by breaking open the water tank at Chawdar on March 1927.

The march of the Mahad Satyagraha was not a hasty reaction to the inhuman treatment meted out to the untouchables. Ambedkar had worked hard for years in preparation for a rational course of action by educating and training the minds of the untouchables for a temperament that would favour their fight against injustices they have been subjected to their entire life. On 9 March 1924, Ambedkar convened a meeting at the Damodar Hall, Bombay, to consider the possibility of establishing a central institution for eliminating the hardships faced by the untouchables by submitting their grievances

[8] Y. B. Damle, *Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Critique and reconstruction*, Third Dr Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture, CSSS/SSS, JNU, 1999, pp. 8-10.
[9] Vidhu Verma, Colonialism and Liberation: Ambedkar's Quest for Distributive Justice, *Economic and Political Weekly* , Sep. 25 - Oct. 1, 1999, Vol. 34, No. 39 (Sep. 25-Oct. 1, 1999), pp. 2804-2810, p. 2805.
[10] Nirmala Singh, A Note on the Concept of Satyagraha, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4., October 1997, pp. 521-26, p. 521.
[11] *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* – XII (1913-1914), Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1964, *Indian Opinion*.Golden Number, December 1914; *Collected Works*, Volume 12, pages 508-19.

before the government. After a profound deliberation, the members of the meeting resolved to establish an institution that will work for the upliftment of the Untouchables and on 20 July 1924*Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha* was established and was registered under the Act XXI of 1860[12] with the following aims and objectives:

- To promote the spread of education among the Depressed classes by opening Hostels or by employing such other means as may seem necessary or desirable
- To promote the spread of culture among the Depressed Classes by opening libraries, social centre and classes for study circles.
- To advance and improve the economic condition of the Depressed Classes by starting Industrial and Agricultural Schools.
- To present the grievances of the Depressed Classes.[13]

By establishing the *Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha*, the purpose of the organization began in earnest by creating awareness and making them conscious of their rights. Side by side, the Sabha also made arrangementsat Sholapur for accommodating high school students and bore all expenses of the boarders of the hostel including clothes, stationary and food.Likewise, the Sabha also started an institution at Bombay with the aim of instilling in the students belonging to the untouchable families, a desire to acquire knowledge and to develop in them the aspiration for social service.*Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha*laid the foundation of Ambedkar's ideas towards the struggle in removing untouchability as the organization began to actively chase its goal towards the upliftment of the untouchables. He travelled from village to village and every urban settlements, spreading the awareness among the untouchables about their rights and educate them to assert their rights. In 1925, the first Provincial Depressed Classes Conference was held at Nipani in the Bombay Presidency and he presided over it. The same year, the first conference of untouchables was held at Malwan.[13]

Another significant event that happened the same year, in 1925, was a Satyagraha that was launched by EV Ramaswamy
Naicker,[14] at Vaikam (Vaikom) in the Travancore State against the caste discrimination in Hindu society. Known as Vaikam Satyagraha, the protest was held to assert the rights of the untouchables to use a 'public road' which had been closed to them as though it was a privately ownedproperty. Following the Vaikam Satyagraha, in 1925, the Ruler of Travancore State had to ease the rule and allow the untouchables to use the public road.[15]Back in 1923, Rao Bahadur SK Bole had moved a

[12] Act XXI of 1860 is an Act for the Registration of Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies, enacted on 21 May 1860. [13] Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*... p. 55.

[13] ML Shahare, *Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar: His Life and Work*, National Council of Educational Research and Training, Mayapuri, New Delhi, 1988, p. 22. The Sholapur Municipality came to the help of the Sabha and sanctioned a grant of Rs. 40/- for the maintenance of the hostel.

[14] E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker founded the Self-respect Movement and the Dravida Kazhagam Party. See Anandhi S., Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925-1948, *Social Scientist*, May - Jun., 1991, Vol. 19, No. 5/6 (May - Jun., 1991), pp. 24-41. Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker launched the *Suyamariathai Iyakkam* (Self Respect Movement) in 1926, in an effort to democratise the Tamil Society. After breaking away from the Congress party in 1924 he began to express his views forcefully on Tamil society like religion, caste hierarchy, and patriarchy in contrast to the reformist zeal of his contemporaries like Gandhi and those of the past like Siddhar and Ramanujam, as he called for a total review of Tamil Brahmanical orthodoxy. p, 24.

[15] Back in 1865, the government of Travancore through its notification had open public roads to all castes, however, in 1884 the government made a fresh notification with a distinct demarcation between streets: *Raja Veedhis* or the King's Highways and *Grama Veedhis* or the VillageRoads and violators

resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council andsucceeded in passing a Bill through the Bombay government in which it directed the local boards, municipalities and the Bombay Corporation 'to allow the untouchables free use of all public places like wells, tanks, schools, hospitals and dharamshalas.' As it was, it remained only on paper. This was the reason why SK Bole was compelled to move another resolution in the Bombay Legislative Council. On 5 August 1926, Bole'recommended that the Government of Bombay Presidency may not give any grant to those municipalities and local boards which failed to give effect to the earlier resolution passed by the council.'[16] This bill laid the foundation of the Mahad Satyagraha. Early next year in January 1927, two major events took place; firstly, a meeting was organized at Koregaon War memorial near Pune by the Depressed Classes. In the meeting, Ambedkar exhorted the congregation recalling how hundreds of their people had fought in the British Army during World War-I but how after the war ended the British Government declared the untouchables unfit for military service. He encouraged the untouchables to agitate against the government for the willful discriminatory policy of prohibiting the untouchables entering the armed forces and to compel the government to remove the ban on disallowing them to serve in the military service. Secondly, Ambedkar was nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council as a Member by the Governor of
Bombay.[17]

It was in the Koregaon War memorial meeting that the Kolaba District Depressed Classes decided to hold a Conference at Mahad on 19 and 20 March 1927 and Ambedkar was informed of the programme. Meticulous preparations for the Conference were carried out for two months by Surendranath Tipnis, Subhedar Savadkar and Anantrao Chitre. Right after the decision to hold a Conference at Mahad, the leaders and workers travelled across hills and valleys to spread the importance of the Conference to all the untouchables. The trouble undertaken was worthwhile as 'boys of fifteen to old men of seventy from far and near plodded distances of over hundred miles with bundles containing pieces of bread hanging from their shoulders and reached Mahad.' Workers and leaders of the Depressed Classesfrom almost all the districts of Maharashtra and Gujarat attended the Conferenceteeming to about ten thousand delegates.[18]

After Ambedkar became a Member of the Bombay Legislative Council,theprospect of placing legitimate grievances of the untouchables before the government looked more possible. For generations, circumstances had deterred the voices of the untouchables but now Ambedkar, given the opportunity, was determined to see that the first Bole Resolution of 1923which was passed by the Bombay Legislative Council and reaffirmed in 1926 did not remain a mere official resolution on paper. It was necessary that these resolutions came into effect because through these resolutions the Mahad

were to be subjected to severe punishments. In this regard, the roads around Vaikom Temple were considered *Grama veedhis* but despite the government's proclamation, the roads were closed for the untouchables.

[16] ML Shahare, *Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar*… p. 24.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 25.

[18] Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble & Ashok Godghate, (eds.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Revolution: Struggle for Human Rights*, Vol. 17 - Part One (Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 4 October, 2003, Reprint, Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, January, 2014, p. 3.

Municipality had already thrown open the Chawdar Tank to the untouchables,but the vehement opposition of the high caste Hindus prevented the untouchables from using the water tank and hence the resolutions remained only in paper.[19]

The Promise of the Chawdar Tank

On the appointed day of the conference at Mahad, Ambedkar rose to deliver his presidential address 'to the half-clad, embarrassed, earnest men and women and began it in his simple, short and forceful sentences.' Reminiscing his childhood days, he talked dearly about the memories of Dapoli from where he had received his early education and recalled the days where'There was a time when we, who are condemned as Untouchables, were much advanced, much ahead in education compared with communities other than the advanced classes. This part of the country was then pulsating with the action and authority of our people.' The British policy of stopping the entry of the untouchables into military services, he asserted, was one of the causes of their downfall. He dwelt further saying that 'The military offered us unique opportunities of raising our standard of life and proving our merit and intellect, courage and brilliance as army officers. In those days Untouchables could also be headmasters of military schools and compulsory primary education in the military camps was very effective and wholesome.' He was convinced 'It is nothing less than a betrayal and a treacheryon the part of the British to have closed the doors of the army to the Untouchables who had helped them establish the Indian Empire while their home Government was at grips with the French during the Napoleonic War.'[20]

Like a tuned flute, he calmed his tone and sent out a heart-rending appeal to the congregation, pleading:

No lasting progress can be achieved unless we put ourselves through a three-fold process of purification: We must improve the general tone of our demeanour, re-tone our pronunciations and revitalise our thoughts.' I, therefore, ask you now to take a vow from this moment to renounce eating carrion. It is high time that we rooted out from our mind the ideas of highness and lowness among ourselves. Make an unflinching resolve not to eat the thrown-out crumbs. We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help, regain our self-respect, and gain self-knowledge.[22]

He urged the people gathered in the meeting to agitate against the ban imposed on their entry into the Army, Navy and Police, and patiently explained to them the usefulness of enrolling inGovernment services and education. He emphasizedthe importance of their self-respect by telling them how extremely disgraceful it was to sell out their human rights in exchange for a few crumbs of bread. He fervently appealed to them to give up the humiliating traditions of enslavement, to take a conscious decision to abandon their *watans*[21] and seek instead the forest lands for agriculture. He concluded,

[19] ML Shahare, *Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar*… p. 25.
[20] Hari Narake, et al., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*… p. 4. [22]*Ibid*.
[21] A *watan* is a perpetual or hereditary rent free land grant, made to a permanent village resident in lieu of the services he is expected to render to the village community. He holds it along with its prerequisites called *hag-lajimas* which accrue to his family, as long as he enjoys the confidence of the village community. A. R. Kulkarni, The Mahar Watan: A Historical Perspective, in Meera Kosambi (ed.), *Intersections: Socio-Cultural Trends in Maharashtra*. New Delhi, Orient Longam Limited, 2000, pp. 121–140, p. 121.

'There will be no difference between parents and animals if they will not desire to see their children in a better position than their own.'[22]

There at the conference several resolutions were passed concerning what was needed to be done both in terms of internal (within the untouchable communities) and external (with caste Hindus and the government) matters. In the case of the external matters, a dual appeal was made to the Caste Hindus and the Government. The conference appealed to the Caste Hindus to help secure the civic rights of the untouchables, open ways for the untouchables to be employed in their services, offer food to untouchable students, and pleaded for the burial of their dead animals themselves. On the Government front, the conference pleaded to the government to pass special law that prohibits the Untouchables from eating carrion, provide them with free and compulsory primary education, and give relief to the Depressed Classes hostels. It also appealed to the government to make the 'Bole Resolution' a reality and not just an official notice on paper, by directing the local bodies, and to proclaim section 144 of Indian Criminal Procedure Code at their places, for its enforcement if the local bodies fail to adhere to the government's order.[23]

On the first day of the conference, a few caste Hindu spokesmen attended the conference both local as well as outsiders, and made speeches supporting the rights of the Depressed Classes and promised to help them. The 'Subjects Committee' had a meeting that night and weighed on the situation and taking into consideration the presence and encouragement of the leaders of the upper classes, who attended the Conference,decidedthat the Conference delegates should go to the Chawdar Tank to establish their right to take water from the tank. Next morning the Conference called upon two caste Hindu spokesmen to support the resolution regarding the duties and responsibilities of the Caste Hindus. The two caste Hindu supported the resolution in exclusion of the clause regarding inter-caste marriage. There was no holding back and in accordance to the resolution of the Mahad Municipality which had thrown open its Tank to the Depressed Classes in 1924, it was now decided that the Untouchables must establish their right to take water from the Tank. The delegates, as decided, began to march peacefullyto the Chawdar Tank to claim their right of taking water from the Tank.[24]

Dhananjay Keer had etched a spectacular procession picture as he put to words how thrilling a spectacle it was of people who were suppressed and trodden-upon under the heels of injustice for ages finally rose to assert their human civil rights. He writes,'A virile and aggressive champion of social revolution, Ambedkar was marching with an army of men to attack all the so-called venerable accepted customs. He was establishing new social levels and new status and was remaking and reshaping Hindustan, the Sick Man of the World!' Keer goes on to add how 'ten thousand people followed their great leader in a file of four represented the pent up might of a suppressed people surged up to surface with an intensity, a force unequal in ages gone by.' It was like as though Ambedkar was 'exorcizing the spirit of despair from the minds of the dumb millions', liberating the mentality that had been caged for

[22] Hari Narake, et al., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*… pp. 4-5.
[23] *Ibid*., p, 5.
[24] *Ibid*.

generations; teaching them that liberty is never received as a gift - it has to be fought for, and that self-elevation is achieved by one's own struggle and never from the blessing of anyone.[25] The multitudes, like pitchers filled to the brim, marched in rhythm reflecting Ambedkar's energy, who by showing his faith roused the faith of his followers.The march proceeded through the streets of Mahad till the Chawdar Tank. At the Chawdar Tank, Ambedkar stood on the verge of the Tank,took water from the Tank and drank it and all the delegates took turnand performed the act of drinking water from the tank thereby exercising their right. The delegates then returned peacefully to the pandal.[28]

Conclusion

Thousands of untouchables drinkingwater from the Chawdar Tank which was prohibited for their use was not necessarily an act of transgression againstany law. Mahad Satyagraha to Chawdar Tank was not initiated for the physical act of violating the law neither was it to transgress the brahmanical law. Moreover, it was not because the water of Chawad Tank had any exceptional qualities. It was about declaring the equality of humans as equal beings and establishing the natural rights as equal citizens. Surely, the untouchables had survived and could still survive without the Chawdar Tank water but the act of non-violent peaceful resistance to evil Satyagrah march was more to it than just resistance against oppression and deprivation; it was a declaration of equality.This, according to Chaudhary, was a universal declaration, a declaration not only because a person is treated unequally, whereas the person is asking for her/his rights to be treated equally, s/he is also saying that there is equality in this world and everyone has to take part in that equality.[26]With the Mahad Satyagraha march and the breaking of the Chawdar Tank water rules, Ambedkar had declared thenorm of equality for the first time in modern Indian history.

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[25] Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*… p. 73. [28]*Ibid*.,p. 74.
[26] Soumyabrata Choudhary, *Living Science* – 13 March 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wow9gurMjSw (accessed on 27 July 2020).

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